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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

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19 July 1968

NND 941053
By MRH Date 4/10/96

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Military Situation in South Vietnam

1. You will recall that I reported to you in late February on the military situation and requirements in South Vietnam after my trip there in the closing days of the TET offensive. My evaluation of the existing situation at that time indicated that there were several unknowns and uncertainties causing us concern. The major ones were:

a. The status of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces; how long it would take for them to recover their fighting strength and whether they had the stamina to withstand the pressure of a prolonged enemy offensive.

b. The ability of General Westmoreland to maintain a satisfactory margin over the VC/NVA in the face of synchronized major enemy attacks throughout the country. (You had earlier approved the expeditious deployment of one brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 27th Marine Regiment to help shore up the situation.)

c. The provision of urban security. The plan was for urban security to be turned over mainly to police forces supported by small mobile ARVN military forces. Most U. S. commanders believed that the ARVN would need assistance from the U. S. forces for this purpose.

d. The extent of the setback to the pacification program.

e. The capability of the enemy to continue the offensive at the TET or lesser scale.

2. The intervening period since the TET offensive has permitted a fairly accurate assessment of enemy activities and capabilities and a development of U. S. strategy and posture of U. S. forces to meet his possible moves. In the following paragraphs I will give you my assessment of the current situation.

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3. ENEMY STRATEGY: Before TET, the enemy's situation had become critical, forcing him to adopt a new strategy which became clear at TET. His strategy was to generate a popular uprising and bring about the overthrow of the government of South Vietnam. If this could be achieved, all other enemy goals would be realized: the collapse of the Vietnamese government, disintegration of its army, expansion of enemy power throughout South Vietnam and the isolation of the United States from the war. A companion goal since TET has been to attrit the United States' will to continue the war, thus weakening GVN-US solidarity.

4. ENEMY TACTICS: To gain his strategic objectives the enemy, at least until quite recently, has adopted a set of tactics designed for their accomplishment. He attempts to reflect an aura of strength and flexibility. Through attacks on widely separated points and stand-off shellings, he hopes to portray an image of a strong force holding the initiative and striking whenever and wherever he chooses. He seeks an exploitable military success in order to shake allied and South Vietnamese will to continue and to encourage the defeatists at home and abroad. He staggers his offensive by rotating main blows on key target areas of SVN thus reducing the cost of another countrywide offensive and again projecting an aura of strength. He has economized on the use of his forces by pulling them from the less profitable battle areas such as the Delta, highlands and central coastal provinces and uses them against targets of greater promise. He seeks to inflict heavy casualties on U. S. forces - a deliberate policy to influence American public opinion. Finally, he continues to place great emphasis on Saigon realizing that control of even a portion of the capital or creation of chaotic conditions there would accelerate the collapse of the GVN and bring about the popular uprising.

5. ENEMY STRENGTH: Enemy forces while not significantly different in total strength from the 222,000 of October 1965 have undergone a significant change in composition. As infiltration from the north increased and recruiting in the south continued, the enemy was gradually able to achieve a strength increase up to just under 290,000 in the fall of 1966. Since that time he has suffered a net loss in total strength during every month but two - January 1968, when the 304th and 320th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Divisions plus large numbers of individual replacements arrived in South

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Vietnam and June of this year during which he avoided contact throughout the country. His losses increased with the start of his Winter-Spring campaign in October 1967; he lost 40,000 during the TET attacks and nearly the same number in the series of attacks which began on 5 May. Altogether he has lost more than 200,000 men since the start of his Winter-Spring campaign. Despite these losses and decline in strength (approx 215,000 in June 1968) the percentage of North Vietnamese in-country has continued to climb at a steady rate both from infiltration and from the commitment of entire units of the NVA. In October 1965, the NVA comprised only 26% of VC/NVA maneuver and combat support strength; today the NVA comprises over 70% of the enemy's combat force.

6. QUALITY OF ENEMY FORCES: The immense turnover in the enemy force caused by the replacement of his battle losses has resulted in a marked lowering of the experience level of enemy troops. By conservative estimates better than half of the force in III CTZ is inexperienced and this same pattern prevails throughout the rest of the country. Captured documents, prisoners of war (PWs) and ralliers indicate a shortage of leaders both in the north, where training is conducted and in the south where they provide battlefield leadership. One study has shown that NVA PWs in grades of private and private first class had received less than the normal 12 weeks of training. The group averaged 35 days and some received no training at all. Another study has shown a corresponding trend in VC experience.

7. ENEMY FORCE STRUCTURE TRENDS: Thus we see certain trends in the enemy force structure. Total enemy strength has been declining since the fall of 1966 and we estimate that it will continue to do so. His losses are consistently greater than his inputs; the war is becoming an increasingly NVA war and the quality of recruits and infiltrators is declining.

8. ENEMY OPERATIONAL TRENDS: A review of enemy operational trends since TET should help us in estimating what we can expect from him now. In late February after his TET momentum had dropped he faced a critical situation. He had lost almost one fifth of his total in-country strength and he had failed in his major offensive of smashing the GVN and causing a general uprising. Yet TET was a

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psychological success in the United States that he must try to exploit. His decision was to sustain the pressure by staggering the main blows of his future offensives both in time and place since he probably could not afford another countrywide offensive of the TET magnitude.

9. ENEMY PLANS AFTER TET: His specific plans called for a 2nd general offensive against Saigon and Hue in mid-April; a major effort in the western highlands in mid-May; in Southern I Corps around Danang in mid-June; and in the DMZ area in mid-July. Our Khe Sanh and Ashau Valley operations spoiled the enemy's extensive preparations for a major line of communications (LOC) network to serve Northern I Corps. The second offensive against Saigon was late getting started because of logistics and force problems. Delayed from 15 April to 5 May, the Saigon attacks were at best a partial success. His initial assaults cost him heavy casualties and were quickly blunted. Adverse international reaction as well as that of the South Vietnamese people caused him to modify his tactics to a lower order of intensity and extend his timetable for Saigon into June. The regiments that were to attack Hue never came close to the city. They were roughly handled and forced to withdraw to the central province base areas. This forced delay in the enemy's summer plans for the DMZ and Northern I Corps. The western highlands campaign was in trouble before it started because of B-52 strikes that commenced in mid-April and reinforcement of friendly units by a U. S. airborne brigade. The most the enemy could muster was a battalion size attack on 25 May. He was under constant tactical air and B-52 attack and he withdrew on 5 June. His planned operation for Southern I Corps was set back at least six weeks by force problems associated with his abortive effort in the highlands.

10. ENEMY SITUATION IN JUNE 1968: By early June, the enemy probably viewed his situation somewhat as follows: many of his units had been forced to withdraw in order to regroup and refit; the western highlands campaign was a loss; his alternate road network in I Corps was not complete; he was required to reduce his efforts in coastal II Corps and his pressure on Saigon was falling off from attrition in battle and the commencement of concentrated B-52 strikes.

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11. PROJECTION OF ENEMY PLANS: In light of observed enemy operational trends and a study of his movements, activity, combat effectiveness, infiltration flow, and information from documents and people, we have attempted to project his plans. For Northern I Corps, to include the DMZ, mid-August appears to be the earliest date for enemy offensive activity and late August as the most likely time. The same estimate holds for efforts against Danang in Southern I Corps. In the Saigon area, assessment of all timing indicators also points to mid-August as the earliest date and late August as the more likely period for a renewed major offensive.

12. FRIENDLY FORCES OPERATIONS: U. S. and Free World allied ground forces are currently positioned throughout South Vietnam and operating with tactical air, artillery and B-52s in such a manner that I am confident that they can cope with renewed enemy offenses. General Abrams believes that he cannot only cope with the enemy attacks but there is a good chance that our current military operations can succeed in aborting a significant part of the planned enemy attacks. Friendly forces are constantly probing and searching out the enemy. Upon making contact massive firepower is brought to bear either by artillery, tactical air or B-52s. The aborting of the enemy's planned attacks in the highlands in late June is a good example of this tactic.

13. FRIENDLY FORCE POSTURE: No major in-country moves of forces are planned in July or August to counter the enemy threat. The B-52s provide a capability to shift firepower rapidly and will continue to have a major influence on the ground battle throughout South Vietnam and in the interdiction campaign in the DMZ area. Complete flexibility in the application of tactical air permits shifting it to areas where needed. Naval gunfire provides added firepower throughout the four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) and permits artillery resources to be employed westward from the coastal areas. Artillery units are postured to provide ready support to ground units. General Abrams has stated that he has not asked for nor does he need additional forces.

14. URBAN SECURITY: The security of urban areas has improved since my visit in February. Saigon is the most critical area as evidenced in both the TET and early May offensives. The

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newly created joint U. S. and GVN organization for controlling the defense of Saigon is working smoothly. General Hay of the U. S. and General Minh of SVN have taken many actions to improve the defense of Saigon. Two examples of these are: (1) the erection of 60 towers around Saigon to permit the triangulation of artillery, rocket or mortar flashes and bring counter-fire to bear - at the time of our visit, reaction time had been reduced to just over one minute; (2) troops have been permanently stationed in the rocket areas moving around day and night. Coordination of National Police efforts with those of the military forces has improved. Enemy routes of infiltration into the cities have been comprehensively plotted and followed back to the enemy bases and camps. Friendly units continually sweep and harass these base areas, camps and routes.

15. STATUS OF SVN ARMED FORCES: The South Vietnamese Armed Forces have recovered from the TET offensive and are fighting shoulder to shoulder with the U. S. and Free World forces. They continue to have problems in equipment and leadership, and their recent mobilization efforts have saturated their training facilities, but they are making definite improvement. Considerable effort is being expended in Washington to work out a reequipping and modernization program that will greatly improve their capabilities over the next several years. U. S. forces are assisting with a basic refresher training program at battalion level. Basic training can be assisted by the release of funds for at least the 1st and 2nd Quarters of FY69, and by the activation of minimum essential combat, combat support and combat service support units.

16. SUMMARY: The current situation as I see it can be summarized as follows:

a. Since TET, the enemy has been required to point his military strategy and tactics more toward support of a political/psychological victory. He attempts to reflect an aura of strength and flexibility while seeking an exploitable military success.

b. Since the fall of 1966 the enemy has suffered a continuing net loss in strength.

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c. The composition of the enemy forces has become predominately North Vietnamese Army.

d. The quality of the enemy forces has declined, particularly since the TET offensive.

e. While sustaining pressure on friendly forces by staggering his offensive efforts both in time and space the enemy is becoming progressively less able to adhere to a time phased schedule of attacks.

f. The next phase of enemy attacks will most likely begin in mid to late August. The main attacks are expected against Saigon, Danang and the DMZ area.

g. The posture and composition of U. S. and Free World forces permit their effective employment against the enemy.

h. General Abrams has the resources to cope with the enemy effort and his forces have the confidence and capability to do so.

i. Organizational and operational actions have been taken to improve the security of urban areas. Particular attention and effort are being focused on Saigon.

j. The South Vietnamese Armed Forces have recovered from the TET offensive. Current reequipping, modernization and training programs, together with their mobilization efforts, will produce continuing improvement in their capabilities.

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